

**Testimony of
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**On “The National Parks:
Will they survive for future generations?”
Before the
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources
Committee on Government reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Denis Galvin. It was my honor and privilege to serve the American people in their National Park System for 38 years. I am delighted to have an opportunity to address the distinguished members of this subcommittee. The series of hearings you are holding on the future of the National Park System are unprecedented in the history of the system, and are extremely important to future generations of Americans. Before I address the issue of the future of our national parks, perhaps it would be helpful if I explained my background.

It was my honor to serve three presidents as Deputy Director of the National Park Service: President Reagan from 1985 to 1989; then, nine years later, President Clinton, from 1998 to 2001; and President George W. Bush until my retirement in 2002. Before I came to Washington, I worked as an engineer in Sequoia and Mt. Rainier national parks, as an instructor of ranger trainees at the Albright Training Center in Grand Canyon National Park, as a supervisor of 600 professional engineers and their associated staff at the Denver Service Center, and as a construction manager in scores of our national parks. I led the implementation of a priority-setting procedure in the National Park Service to ensure that funds appropriated by Congress were put to the best use. And I was responsible for ensuring that the Service complied with cultural and environmental laws at national, state, and local levels.

Throughout those nearly four decades, I witnessed the appreciation and affection that Americans feel for their national parks. I heard their passionate insistence that the national parks should be preserved for their children and grandchildren. I learned that the citizens of this country recognize, and care deeply, that there is no other place like Yellowstone, no parallel for the Grand Canyon, and no better way to know what shaped our nation than to visit park units such as Independence Hall and Gettysburg, Martin Luther King's birth home and Thomas Edison's laboratory.

A major part of the National Park Service mission is to ensure that the American people are able to access, enjoy, and learn from the System's 388 units. But from the beginning, the agency's responsibility has been larger. Congress directed the Park Service to ensure that enjoyment of the national parks occurs in a manner that preserves them in a natural condition for others. Congress said that to do less would allow America's irreplaceable treasures to shrink in value for the next visitor, or the next generation of visitors, and such erosion would be wrong.

Every year we see the strongest evidence possible that the Park Service mission—to preserve the parks unimpaired—is popular. More than 270 million people visited America's national parks last year. We know from visitor surveys that every two years about one-third of all adults in the country visit a unit of the National Park System, and they give the parks an approval rating of 95 percent. The most frequently cited reason for their visits is sightseeing. The preeminent attraction of the parks is their intrinsic qualities—their scenery and wildlife. Through their visits and comments, the American people have let it be known, year after year and by overwhelming margins, that vigorous protection of these park resources has enhanced not encumbered their enjoyment.

During the last five years, appropriations for the entire National Park Service are flat or slightly down. In FY 2001, total NPS appropriations were \$2.3 billion. The estimate for FY 2006 is \$2.2 billion. Importantly, however, Congress and the administration recently have focused on better funding annual operations of the parks so they can open the doors, turn on the lights and protect the resources. Last year, although the overall increase for park operations was not as high as in 1999-2002, the park-by-park increase 06.1 percent for base operations of the national parks—the money that funds park level needs—was the most significant that has been enacted.

To put the importance of this in perspective, it is useful to understand the annual budgeting process for the Park Service. Each national park has a file of needed increase. The regions and the national office review that list based on budget targets from OMB and the administration. Those annual targets frequently have a specific emphasis—one year they might emphasize coral reefs, another they might emphasize homeland security, the next they might emphasize partnerships. At the end of the day, parks generally receive little additional money for the effort they expend producing their requests. At the same time, the administration may build a 2.3 percent civilian cost of living adjustment into its budget, which Congress then raises to 4 percent to provide parity with military employees. That difference comes straight out of park budgets, since it rarely, if ever, is funded. So, the parks may receive a sum of money. It is often an amount that does not meet their most basic needs. They take what they receive and plug as many holes in their budgets as they can with it. One byproduct is that the structure of filled positions varies significantly park-by-park, and frequently leaves important positions unfilled, because the parks simply have to make do by deciding not to fill vacancies that occur when the park needs money for fixed costs and seasonal employees. This problem is further compounded when the Park Service budgets increases for cyclic maintenance and repair and rehab activities through the annual operations funding line, further impacting the draw on scarce park operational funding.

These issues are particularly important, because many park budgets are 90 percent salaries. Inadequate operations funding means the parks go backwards in terms of their personnel, since their fixed costs continually rise more than their appropriations.

Then there is the maintenance backlog. There have been two times in the history of the national parks when significant new investments were made in their infrastructure—the CCC in the 1930s and Mission 66 between 1956 and 1966. These two built 90 percent of today's park infrastructure.

Because Mission 66 was completed 40 years ago, the national parks have aging facilities as well as facilities whose capacity is being exceeded. The classic example of this is the sewage treatment plant at Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park, now being reconstructed. The plant was built in the 1950's to operate during a five to six month visitor season. Half a century

later that plant would be operating all year, including the winter season. This raises a question regarding the Park Service's Facility Condition Index, which rates the condition of individual items of Park Service infrastructure. If this plant was fully repaired and in top condition, the FCI would indicate that no further work is needed on it. Yet, it was obsolete due to changing conditions and does not meet the current day needs of the park.

Since 1966, the park system has grown, which also has a fiscal impact. That impact is less driven by actual land acquisition than it is impacted by infrastructure. The historic buildings at Golden Gate, Sandy Hook, Ellis Island, and elsewhere, are examples of infrastructure that is enormously expensive to preserve and maintain. For these kinds of facilities, appropriate partnerships that involve leases or other solutions, like Sandy Hook is now exploring, are necessary alternatives to consider. They also point out the inadequacy of the Interior budget.

When the Presidio was transferred to the Park Service, \$125 million actually came from the defense appropriations bill. This may be a model to consider where former military installations are involved. Clearly, based on its typical allocations, the Interior appropriations bill is insufficient to eliminate the backlog and meet the fiscal needs of the parks without some additional infusion of dollars analogous to what was done in the 1930s and 1950's-60's time period.

After 40 years in the Park Service, I'm as convinced as I ever was of the enormous importance of the national parks as an educator of our citizens and protector of our heritage. They bring together people from every corner of our, and other, nations. Their capacity for engaging the citizenry in the meaning of the American experience is enormous. One of the pleasures of retirement is the opportunity it provides to explore these places in depth. Two years ago I stood in the cemetery at Gettysburg and watched a father place his two small children in front of the Lincoln bust. He translated the Gettysburg address into their native tongue. No statistic will ever capture that moment, but for me, it illustrates the power and potential of the national park's enduring mission.

Thank you for hearing my testimony. I welcome your questions.